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SUBJECT: EPRT EAST-BAGHDAD: LEGAL ASSISTANCE CENTER
ADDRESSES WOMEN,S ISSUES IN SOUTHEASTERN BAGHDAD

This is an ePRT Baghdad East cable.

¶1. (U) SUMMARY: Zafraniyyah is a sometimes violent, mixed semi-rural/urban area on the outskirts of the city, squeezed between the Diyala and the Tigris rivers in south Eastern Baghdad. In an effort to develop indigenous civil society organizations, ePRT East-Baghdad and the Brigade focused on women's needs as an important step. Through Quick Response Funds (QRF), a local Non-Governmental Organization (NGO) opened a Women's Center that now provides no-cost legal and medical assistance to residents. More than 100 women visited the center in its first full month of operation, and noted that key concerns for Zafraniyah residents are displacement, lost and damaged property, access to child rearing assistance, and domestic violence. END SUMMARY.

BACKGROUND

¶2. (U) Zafraniyyah is a sometimes violent, mixed semi-rural/urban area on the outskirts of Baghdad squeezed between the Diyala and the Tigris rivers. The population is predominantly Shi'a, with a Sunni presence. Zafraniyyah is a case study of post-2003 Iraq, having seen a significant amount of sectarian violence after 2003, and during the 2007 surge. Its largest mosque, with a huge green dome that overlooks a main highway into town, was once Sunni. In the past 90 days, more than 40 security incidents have been recorded by U.S. forces. In conjunction with its military partners, the ePRT sought projects in this area that might help the growth of a civil society that provide alternatives to violence.

¶3. (U) Toward this end, the ePRT provided approximately USD 83,000 in Quick Response Funds (QRF) to Shatha Naji. Naji is co-founder of the Women for Peace organization, an independent, non-governmental organization (NGO), established in 2003. It focuses on improving women's independence and propagating the principles of peace while increasing women's awareness about their role in society.

¶4. (U) The NGO grantee opened the al-Zafraniyyah Women's Support Center to the public on December 22, 2009. The Center is open six days a week and is funded through July 31, ¶2010. The low economic status of the women (many of whom are widows) in the area precludes charging a fee for services.

CENTER RESOURCES

¶5. (U) A social worker is on-site five days a week. She is available for one-on-one counseling sessions, and she also meets with groups of five or six women to discuss shared problems. In addition, she leads lectures and workshops for

approximately 20 women at a time. Her counseling sessions address issues such as displacement, lost and damaged property, child rearing and domestic violence.

¶16. (U) Two lawyers spend a total of four days a week at the center and are on-call other days. They offer free legal advice and will present cases to local councils or courts. A legal assistant helps women collect documentation for claims and provides other administrative support. The lawyers also organize workshops on the United Nation's Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination (CEDAW) and the legal rights of Iraqi women. The legal help is proving popular; a January 14 legal rights workshop attracted 63 women.

¶17. (U) A medical doctor comes twice a week to see patients and provide referrals for follow-up care at local hospitals as necessary. She also teaches a first-aid and leads health workshops. A recent session covered breast cancer awareness, basic first-aid, infections and hygiene.

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A DAY AT THE CENTER

¶18. (U) The ePRT's implementing partner provided a report of a typical day at the Center:

¶19. (U) About 26 women attended a session on breast cancer awareness. Most of those present were from low-income families without a fixed monthly income. The women included widows, divorcees, married housewives, students and Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs). Some women brought their children with them.

¶10. (U) A female doctor began with a question and answer session where some participants spoke about members of their families who were victims of breast cancer. At the end of the session, the doctor examined women by request. The exams were not limited to cancer screening. The doctor referred some women who may need treatment to hospitals, and provided medicine to others on the spot. Leaflets about breast cancer were distributed among the participants, and the session concluded when the grantee spoke to the participants and emphasized the necessity of passing on information they learned at the sessions to their families and relatives. She said it was part of their new empowered role now that they had visited the Center.

LEGAL CLINIC

¶11. (U) In this typical week the clinic addressed 12 cases for local women. The cases primarily involved obtaining social benefits from the government, and the transference of pensions from deceased relatives (typically husbands killed in post-2003 violence) to the client. One woman sought help obtaining a divorce, and another sought legitimization of her four children from an unregistered relationship with the deceased father; her goal is to receive citizenship papers for her children to enable them to attend school. A final case involved a woman fired from her job due to political affiliations who sought relief from the Ministry of Industry.

CHALLENGES

¶12. (U) More than 100 women have visited the centrally-located Center in its first month. However, concerns about the area's security situation have dampened even wider attendance. The ePRT is encouraging the efforts of three community liaisons paid for in the grant to publicize the center's services and activities. They distribute brochures at public places, such as hospitals, schools and council halls. As peers and fellow residents of

the neighborhood, they should prove trustworthy guides to the resources the Center offers.

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